DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 209 SP 014 101

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TITLE Curriculum Development Policy Issues.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. Task Force on Curriculum Development.
PUB DATE Oct 76
NOTE 11p.; Paper prepared for the NIE Curriculum Development Task Force; for related documents, see SP 014 095-115, SP 014 185-186, ED 124 530, ED 140 401, and ED 144 217

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Development; Curriculum Planning; Curriculum Research; *Educational Policy; *Federal Programs; *Government Role; Information Dissemination; *Needs Assessment; *Resource Allocations
IDENTIFIERS *National Institute of Education

ABSTRACT

Based on ten years of experience in curriculum research and development, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory supports the following principles concerning policy issues in curriculum development: (1) state and local policy makers and practitioners should make decisions about needed curriculum development, and the same persons should make decisions about intended outcomes and specifications of curriculum content; (2) the best use of the National Institute of Education's limited resources would be to focus development efforts on special target populations, such as minorities, on emerging societal trends, such as metric education, and on alternative delivery systems, such as experience-based learning; and (3) research development, dissemination, and implementation are all critical interrelated elements in any problem resolution strategy. (DS)

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ED170249

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT POLICY ISSUES

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A paper prepared for the
NIE Curriculum Development Task Force

October 1976

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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SP 014 101

ABSTRACT

The analyses and recommendations presented in this paper are based on the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's ten years of experience in field based research and curriculum development. Three critical policy issues are discussed:

1. How and by whom should curriculum development agendas be set?
2. What is the appropriate role of NIE in fostering curriculum development?
3. What are the appropriate relationships among reserach, curriculum development, dissemination and local utilization?

In relation to Issue #1 our experience supports two general principles: First, state and local policy makers and practitioners should make decisions about needed curriculum development; and second, the same persons should make decisions about intended outcomes and specifications of curriculum content. Research and development institutions can and should play an important role in influencing and supporting this agenda setting process, but decisions should be made by users.

In examining Issue #2, strong traditions of state and local control must be carefully balanced against NIE's mission to meet national priorities. As the NIE Discussion Guides indicate, publishers have been highly responsive to traditional needs. The best use of NIE's limited resources would be to focus development efforts on areas of need not being met such as the following:

- Special target populations, such as minorities, handicapped, gifted, etc.
- Emerging societal trends, such as metric education, applications of computer technology, etc.
- Alternative delivery systems, such as experience based learning, satellite communication systems, etc.

In response to Issue #3, we believe that research, development, dissemination and implementation are all critical interrelated elements in any problem resolution strategy. The way in which these elements are most effectively combined is a function of the problem under attack and the current state of knowledge relating to that problem.

The appropriate balance of relationships among these functions should be determined by collaborative program planning among practitioners, researchers and NIE staff members.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT POLICY ISSUES

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the NIE policy study on curriculum development. Based on our ten years of experience in field based research and curriculum development, there appear to be three critical policy issues:

Issue #1	How and by whom should curriculum development agendas be set?
Issue #2	What is the appropriate role of NIE in fostering curriculum development?
Issue #3	What are the appropriate relationships among research, curriculum development, dissemination and local utilization?

Issue #1: How and by whom should curriculum development agendas be set?

NIE's initial harvest of curriculum concerns indicated that everyone wants a voice in curriculum development. This is as it should be. However, such a finding provides little policy guidance.

Few disagree that curriculum development--the process of defining intended outcomes and designing the structured learning experiences and materials of schooling--is at the heart of educational improvement. Perhaps that is why curriculum decision making is of vital concern at all levels of education. The problem lies in determining who should make what decisions.

Our experience supports two general principles:

Principle #1: Decisions regarding needed curriculum development should be made by state and local policy makers and practitioners. Research and development institutions should function as catalysts for sensing, defining and communicating these needs to appropriate funding agencies.

Principle #2: Decisions regarding the intended outcomes and content specifications of curriculum must be made by state and local policy makers and practitioners. Research and development institutions may influence these decisions, but they should not make the decisions.

The Laboratory's curriculum work in reading and language development illustrates the application of these principles.

This development work has focused on three major target groups: children in Alaskan villages, Northwest Indians and Guam. In each case Laboratory efforts were initiated at the specific request of users. In identifying needs and helping users communicate their needs to federal agencies responsible for supporting new curriculum development, the Laboratory served as a catalyst.

In the case of the Northwest Indian reading and language development materials, a Program Policy Board, representing Northwest State Departments of Education, and the Coastal, Mountain and Plateau Tribes, was formed to guide the setting of desired outcomes and the preparation of the materials. This board played a key decision making role in developing a user-driven curriculum. Equally important,

representatives of the various tribes actually wrote and illustrated the materials. The Laboratory provided program management and coordination along with technical help in linguistics, development and evaluation.

The continuing dialogue among users, Laboratory technical experts and NIE had reciprocal advantages for all concerned. Local users attained a sense of accomplishment and pride in having actually produced the curriculum (as well as having developed capacities for further curriculum development). The Northwest Laboratory's technical experts gained greater sensitivity and skill in working with local user groups and in testing and refining materials. And NIE came to view user-driven curriculum development as a three-way partnership, balancing NIE concerns with those of local users and the Laboratory.

Our recommendation on Issue #1:

- o NIE should utilize its existing network of research and development institutions to work with practitioners to identify and prioritize user needs and to establish specific outcomes and content specifications for curriculum development work.

Issue #2: What is the appropriate role of NIE in fostering curriculum development?

To answer this question, the interplay of two factors must be considered. First is the firm foundation of state and local control in curriculum decision making. Second is NIE's mission to attack national concerns with limited resources.

Considering the first factor--state and local control--one can conclude that the purpose of any federal involvement in curriculum development should be to provide alternatives for consideration, rather than to advocate a particular approach or curricula.

Considering the second factor--fulfillment of the NIE mission--one should examine the needs not now being met. Beginning with the basic belief that curriculum development programs are at the heart of educational improvement and change, we conclude that it must be a major focus of the work of the National Institute of Education.

The private sector--mainly publishing companies--has played an important role in curriculum development. Publishers have done a commendable job in preparing basic large volume materials. Faced with scarce resources, NIE should not duplicate this work. However, because of their limited sales potential, materials for meeting the needs of special target groups, such as minority populations, handicapped and gifted, for coping with new societal trends such as use of computer technology and metric education, and for supportive alternative delivery systems, such as experience based learning and satellite telecommunications systems, have not been provided by the private sector.

Our recommendations on Issue #2, therefore, are as follows:

- NIE should give priority to support of curriculum development for dramatically underserved populations, emerging societal trends and needs, and alternative delivery systems.

- o Within these areas NIE should utilize its existing network of research and development institutions to systematically assess user needs for new curricula and to implement the necessary research and development to produce curriculum materials.

Issue #3: What are the appropriate relationships among research, curriculum development, dissemination and utilization?

The Laboratory's research and development work with practitioners and policy makers in the Northwest focuses on soliciting their input and advice on needs identification and problem definition: and then working closely with them in planning and implementing programmatic solutions to these problems. A review of the programs we have cooperatively designed illustrates how the nature of a given problem dictates the manner in which research, development, dissemination and utilization activities should be combined to effect problem resolution.

In some cases, as with the Rural Education Program, we have emphasized use of existing knowledge about planning, problem solving and American rural culture to develop the Rural Futures Development Strategy. The nature of the problem and the existence of a relevant knowledge base lead us to focus on development and evaluation rather than research. In other cases, as with the Oregon Competency Based Education Program, lack of an existing knowledge base leads us to invest heavily in research. In this case, we are attempting to build a comprehensive knowledge base about the impact of competency based

education on the learning environment, while at the same time developing and disseminating materials and training procedures to assist in installing accepted goal based planning and evaluation systems.

These two cases illustrate our position that research, development, dissemination and implementation are all critical elements of any strategy to attack regional and national problems. However, achieving the most effective combination of elements demands a careful analysis of the issue--or issues--at hand. To suggest that NIE or a research and development institution should establish an a priori position on the percentage of funds which should be allocated to research or to development is inappropriate. Rather, the nature of the problem and the state of the art in dealing with that problem dictate the balance among research, development, dissemination and utilization.

We would see this analysis being applied in two steps as each programmatic effort is planned. The first step would be to consider strategy for attacking the particular problem and asking such questions as: What are the implications for curriculum? for teacher education? for organization and administration? etc. The second step would be to consider the implication of each strategy; that is, in considering the curriculum development strategy for meeting the problem, what level of effort is needed for research? for evaluation? for dissemination?

Apart from a determination of the appropriate emphasis on research, development, evaluation and dissemination for each programmatic effort, there is the question of the needed emphasis on increasing the capacity of institutions for carrying out these various functions. For example, NIE's Dissemination and Resource Group has begun a program to build dissemination capacity in state education agencies.

Our recommendations on Issue #3 are as follows:

- NIE should utilize its existing network of research and development institutions to assist users and policy makers in sharply defining regional and national priorities and in initiating programmatic attacks on identified problems.

- Such programmatic effort should involve a careful coordination and appropriate balance of research, development, dissemination and implementation activities.

- NIE should support greater research on the processes of development, dissemination and implementation of curriculum development results and build such capacities where needed.

BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Lawrence D. Fish has been Executive Director of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory since 1966. He received a B.A. degree in mathematics from Bethany-Peniel College in 1942, an M.Ed. in Secondary Curriculum from UCLA in 1950 and an Ed.D in Curriculum and Psychology from Washington State University in 1964. He has worked as an elementary teacher; a high school mathematics and science teacher; Coordinator of Curriculum for Couer d'Alene School District in Idaho; Director of Curriculum for the Idaho Department of Education; Superintendent of Schools at Lake Oswego, Oregon; and Associate Professor of Education and Director of the Bureau of Educational Research at the University of Oregon. His career interests and work have focused on educational improvement and change through research and curriculum development processes.